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How Teachers Can Help Homeless Students

Students experiencing homelessness may find regular school attendance difficult. Yet school may be the only place of stability in a child's life. Every time children change schools, they may lose between four to six months of academic progress. Children who continually change schools may feel "different" and have adjustment difficulties. Below are strategies teachers and school staff can use to help new students adjust more easily into their new school settings.

1. Stabilize the child's basic needs.

Have food, clothing, shelter, medical care, basic hygiene, and transportation needs resolved. Provide a community resource list to the family or youth. If necessary, find a place for students to shower. Keep nutritious snacks available. Don't ask students with insecure housing to bring food items or treats to school.

2. Administer a brief educational assessment to the child to determine their level of academic ability.

A brief assessment in reading, math, and obtaining a writing sample will avoid teaching above or below a student's ability while school records are obtained. Do an oral interview to find out the child's school history and share this information with other teachers.

3. Spend some time each week to allow new students to "check-in" with their teacher.

Give new students consistent time with you. Assign an adult to check-in daily with new children during the first month of school. Have an adult watch a new student during recess for the first few weeks because play time may be difficult for new students. Assign new students a "job" or have them become involved in extra-curricular activities.

4. Pair a new student with a "buddy" in the classroom on the first day of school.

A buddy will keep a child in contact with someone who knows their way around school. A buddy can also make sure a child has all their books and supplies to do work at home at the end of the day. Other welcoming activities include:

- Lunch with different staff members and the student's buddy during the first week of school.
- Play get acquainted games or have the students fill out an "All About Me" sheet.
- Have a student give the new child a tour of the building, and introduce the child to faculty.
- Create a "Catching Act of Kindness" bulletin board in your school.

5. Provide structure-adhere to a consistent daily routine and clear, concise rules.

Don't assume the child knows middle class behavior expectations, no matter how old the student is. Be patient and persistent in trying to help. Learn the unwritten rules of the poverty, middle class and wealth classes. Know how to work with students who use the casual register speech pattern (Dr. Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*).

6. Facilitate successful experiences for new students.

Many students who have not had a stable school experience have low self esteem and lack positive feelings about school. Provide 10 to 20 times the normal amount of reassurance to

children in transition.

7. Plan assignments so children can keep up without having to take work home.

Schedule the school day to allow teachers to help with school assignments before the end of the day.

- Provide school supplies and books. Provide “special occasion” supplies in private.
- Don’t withdraw privileges if a child doesn’t return school materials
- Don’t take possessions away as a disciplinary measure.
- If a child falls asleep in class, let him/her sleep. If may be needed rest from living in a car or shelter.

8. If tutoring is required, be proactive in obtaining it through school or community programs.

9. If counseling is necessary, refer the child to the school counselor or outside community agency.

The child may have many and varied emotional needs that require attention.

10. Reach out to parents.

Send a “welcome” videotape home to the parents. Invite parents with a special invitation to a getting acquainted time. Provide transportation to home and school conferences.

Above all, don’t let the student “slip through the cracks” or the system.

Suggestions for Teachers of Homeless Students

- ❖ Make the child feel welcome.
- ❖ Make a new student file that include things to send home to parents (i.e. school rules, classroom rules, lunchroom rules, class schedule, and list of special classes).
- ❖ Provide well-defined transition procedures from one activity to another.
- ❖ Plan ahead – whenever possible, inform students ahead of time about substitute teachers and change in activities. This will foster a sense of safety and security.
- ❖ Coordinate any educational plan with the school counselor.
- ❖ Expect and unobtrusively monitor regressions.
- ❖ Offer encouragement and understanding and recognize the child's talents and accomplishments. Give students the opportunity to see some of their experiences as positive (e.g. places they have traveled).
- ❖ Allow personal possessions – keep in mind that any possession may be the child's only one.
- ❖ Give choices when appropriate to counter the loss of control experienced in their lives.
- ❖ Don't penalize homeless students for being late before finding out if they have transportation and an alarm clock.
- ❖ Assign projects that can be broken into small components to ensure students have at least some success. The experience of mastery is critical to their self-image.
- ❖ Maintain the child's privacy – discuss homework situations away from other classmates. Give the student a clipboard to take home as a portable desk to work on.
- ❖ Avoid TV assignments (students living in shelters may not make the channel choices for the group).
- ❖ Show sensitivity when asking children to bring food, photographs, favorite toys, or other items from home. Homeless children are often embarrassed to admit that they do not have these things.
- ❖ Avoid taking away recess/gym class as a disciplinary consequence. (This may be the only time students who are homeless have a space to run.) Children are often without adequate play area at shelters or in the streets.
- ❖ Don't assume younger students know how to play. They may have to be taught to do so.

- ❖ Help the child participate in field trips, school activities, and class projects through understanding of her/his living environment and access to resources. Arrange school picture fees so children who are homeless may have picture too.
- ❖ Ensure that children in homeless situations have easy access to assistance in case of personal difficulties (i.e. counselors). Allow students to express fears and frustrations and allow opportunities to do so in other ways in addition to verbalizing (i.e. drawing). Help children find positive outlets for anger.
- ❖ Help children take an active role in their life. A sense of empowerment is critical to overcoming helplessness (i.e. make child a helper in class, have the child tutor a younger child, promote activities they are good at).
- ❖ Offer parents suggestions for spending time with their children, helping with schoolwork, etc.

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For additional information, please contact Mary Maronek, Coordinator, Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program, mary.maronek@dpi.wi.us or (608) 261-6322, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

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